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*The Great Gatsby*: Material Fantasies and Skewed Perceptions

Trumpets blared boisterously, people celebrated carelessly, and money flowed freely at the time in which F. Scott Fitzgerald composed *The Great Gatsby*. The 1920s came with great economic prosperity, which lead to many people leading luxurious and careless lives. In turn, many Americans began to emphasize the importance of wealth, material possessions and social standings. The ownership of tangible items took precedence over the ability to have intangible emotions and personal connections. The narrator of this novel, Nick, comments on the state of the era, revealing the repercussions of a life lead based purely on material ambitions. *The Great Gatsby* suggests that one’s fixation with material wealth leads to the inability to discern between genuine emotions and pure emotionless desire, which causes one to lose the ability to perceive what it is real.

Symbols appear throughout the novel to suggest that Gatsby has intertwined his separate dreams of Daisy and of wealth into a single dream. Fitzgerald conjures the image of stairs throughout *The Great Gatsby* as one of these symbols. As Gatsby remembers one of his early encounters with Daisy he recalls that, “out of the corner of his eye [he] saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (117). In this instance, Gatsby associates Daisy and her social standing with his dream of obtaining more wealth and climbing the social ladder to a higher position. He creates the image of feeding in this scene, suggesting that his fantasies have become a form of necessary sustenance for him. He also seems to confuse his love for Daisy with his love for wealth and dream of obtaining a higher social position. The “single green light” (26) that appears throughout the novel comes to represent Gatsby’s ever-present goal of securing Daisy’s love. Gatsby mentions to Daisy, “ ‘you always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock’ ” (98). This shows that the green light is ever-present in Gatsby’s eyes, always burning, which suggests that his goal to win Daisy’s love is also an ever-present thought in his mind. The color green is often associated with money, but can also be a symbol of growth as well. This symbolism shows that Gatsby’s desire for Daisy and his desire for social and monetary growth are synonymous. The name Daisy itself is a symbol of flourishing growth, substantiated by Gatsby’s observation that “at his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete” (117). The incarnation that he speaks of is Daisy’s embodiment of his material dreams. As the novel progresses, Gatsby’s visions of Daisy and wealth become even more intertwined. Nick constantly remarks on the attractiveness and enticement of Daisy’s voice, but cannot connect to a single source until Gatsby pronounces, “her voice is full of money” (127). Nick, a character who is not enraptured by a thirst for material items, can hear the beauty of Daisy’s voice, where as Gatsby only hears her voice for the value behind it. Once again, Gatsby struggles in distinguishing the difference between his love for Daisy and the promise of wealth that she brings, therefore unable to distinguish his dreams of love for Daisy from the reality that his love is only of money.

Not only does the Fitzgerald’s novel suggest that a focus on material dreams leads to misinterpretation of one’s feelings, but it also implies that material dreams are not truly worth the value that society places on them. Nick discredits the legitimacy of material dreams and shows Gatsby’s extreme unawareness of his present life by juxtaposing the past and the present. For instance, he reflects upon the reactions of the sailors who discovered America and thinks that the sailors were “face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock” (189). Nick, by claiming that the discovery of the new continent was the last time in history worthy of immense wonder, suggests that the material dreams and social aspirations are not deserving of the amount of value that Gatsby assigns to them. He juxtaposes the sailor’s wonder with Gatsby’s wonder, calling attention to the minuteness of Gatsby’s object of wonder when compared to the gloriousness and beauty of the new world. He continues the passage by writing “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us… So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189). In these final phrases of the novel, Fitzgerald suggests that through investing himself in his dreams, Gatsby had invested himself in a false future, further detaching himself from his current life and the reality that he and Daisy would not be reunited as he had hoped. The image of contesting nature by moving into the past as time moves forward yet again suggests an unawareness of reality in that Gatsby expects that he can live in the present through the past. Gatsby’s inability to separate his love for Daisy and his love for money coincides with his failure to distinguish his fantasized and fabricated life from reality, therefore becoming disconnected from himself and his real life. Nick narrates, “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [the telephone message] would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (169). By the end of the novel, Gatsby realizes that his dreams will not come true. Through this realization he loses “the old warm world” (169) therefore suggesting that he has lost touch with the world around him. He centers his life on a single dream, suffering from disillusionment when he finally becomes aware that his dream is not reality. Similarly to the way in which Fitzgerald uses the juxtaposition of the past and present to point out Gatsby’s disconnection from himself, he also uses the motif of loneliness and separation to reveal Gatsby’s distance from others.

The loneliness motif points out Gatsby’s physical as well as emotional detachment from his surroundings, which is a direct product of his obsession with Daisy and her wealth. Once again, Nick observes Gatsby at one of his parties and narrates, “my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes… but no one swooned backward on Gatsby and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link” (55). In this scene, Gatsby’s detachment from others shows physically. He stays away from females’ company in attempt to stay faithful to Daisy, showing that his detachment is a direct product of his love for her. Fitzgerald creates the image of Gatsby elevated on the stairs, which may represent his high social standing. This symbol brings to mind the act of climbing and rising, which Gatsby once did from the lower rungs of society. Nick reveals Gatsby’s original identity as “James Gatz—that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it … at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career” (104). Gatsby changes his name and completely transforms his identity to begin a career and gain a higher social position. His change in identity serves as an example of how large of a factor the dream of material wealth has become in his life.

Nick draws attention to the extent of Gatsby’s dream to suggest that it has developed into something larger and become more of an alternate reality than just a dream. He notices the immensity of Gatsby’s dream when he notes that, “[The colossal vitality of his illusion] had gone beyond her, beyond everything ... No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart” (101). The word “vitality” which Fitzgerald chooses to describe Gatsby’s illusion suggests that the illusion itself is a fully developed and living entity. This illusion has become such a prominent part of Gatsby’s reality that he fully believes it is real and alive. The use of the world “ghostly”, which surfaces images of death, describes Gatsby’s heart. Fitzgerald juxtaposes these two contrasting ideas of a living dream and ghostly heart to show the irony in that Gatsby’s dreams live and flourish while his heart is hollow and deathly. This further suggests that as Gatsby invests himself in the false life of his dreams, he comes closer to internal emptiness and death.

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator implies that by focusing on the achievement of material goals, one can no longer distinguish between emotions and greedy desire, therefore confusing dreams and reality. Gatsby consumes himself with his dreams, confuses his love for wealth with his love for Daisy, his past dreams with his fabricated future, and eventually becomes detached from himself and others. For Gatsby, the failure of his dreams to come true in the end leads to his disillusionment. Perhaps the flashy show of the 1920s put on a wonderful jazz and flapper-packed act that enchanted some, but *The Great Gatsby* warns that consequences come with a careless and wealth-obsessed lifestyle. One must forfeit the pleasures of true emotions and risk gaining a skewed perception of reality in order to pursue material success.